

How to Create Effective Advertising

June 1990

by Carolyn André

Advertisers spend billions of dollars each year pushing products. Yet many of them, possessors of large and small ad budgets alike, complain that the ads for which they pay so dearly don't do enough. And, alas, they're frequently right.

True, advertising that sells is often divinely inspired, but effective advertising requires more than divine inspiration. For an ad to be effective, it must sell the right features of a product to the right audience, in addition to being clear and well crafted.

That sounds simple enough. So why, you're wondering, does so much advertising fail to do the job it sets out to do? Naturally, there are lots of reasons—too many reasons, in fact, for us to cover all of them here. But in my experience, most advertising fails because clients don't give their advertising agency the right input *before* the agency's creative team puts pen to paper.

At the very least, that input should include the following three components: well-defined goals for your ad, a strategy based on where your company is now and where you want to take it, and a true understanding of the target market and how that market perceives your product.

Setting Goals. Let's start with goals for advertising. Naturally, your advertising goals will vary, depending on your strategy, how long your company's been around, your product history, and the way you're perceived in the marketplace vis-à-vis your competitors. If you're a start-up company, for example, your initial goal is typically to make people aware that you're in the marketplace. If you're a well-known company with proven products, you may want to persuade the target audience that your new product is better than the competition's. If the fiscal year is closing and you're falling short of your sales goals, you may want a tactical ad designed to push boxes out the door.

You would assume that deciding just what you want your ad to achieve would be as straightforward as death and taxes, but that's not necessarily so. You'd be amazed by the number (not to mention the size and prestige) of advertisers whose advertising goals are vague.

Some time ago, I did some work for a well-known computer magazine whose publisher told me it was losing a major advertiser. The magazine had run one of the advertiser's full-page ads for several weeks, but the ad had not delivered the number of phone calls the advertiser had anticipated. Naturally, the advertiser blamed the magazine. The fault, however, lay in the ad itself.

That ad defied you to find the toll-free number buried within it. When I asked the ad's creator why he'd hidden this crucial component, he told me that he hadn't been asked to create a direct-response ad. "It was an image ad," he said, "and at the last minute the client wanted me to add a toll-free number."

If you don't spell out your goals (in this case, the undisclosed goal was to keep that direct-response phone ringing), scenarios such as this one will continue to be the rule rather than the exception. An image ad and a direct-response ad are very different animals—they look different from each other, and they do different things. It's up to you to determine what you want the ad to accomplish, and it's your responsibility to convey that to your ad agency.

Deciding Strategy. Once you have your goal in mind, you need a clearly articulated vision of how you want your company and products to be perceived. (Remember: Knowing what you want makes deciding whether you're getting it a lot easier.)

I recently evaluated two alternative ads for the same product. One ad created the impression of a state-of-the-art product, hot technology from a modern, go-get-'em kind of company. The other gave the impression of a reliable, low-risk product from a company that was clearly on the outskirts of technology's forefront. There was nothing inherently wrong with either image. The company was known as large, stable, and reliable, but it suffered from rumors that its technology was no longer up-to-date. The ad that created the impression of a state-of-the-art, hot product, therefore, was perhaps the more appropriate of the two. However, the client and the agency couldn't agree on which ad to run, because neither had articulated what the ad was intended to do.

Understanding Your Target. Once company goals and strategy are set, it's critical to position your product so that your target market can relate to it. To do that, of course, you need to understand that market.

Understanding, I mean *really* understanding, your target market is more difficult than it sounds. True understanding goes beyond the numbers so readily available from today's demographers and statisticians. Numbers don't always speak clearly, but the members of your target market will. So go to them. Ask them how they perceive the market, how they think your product fits in. Ask them how and why they buy what they buy, and last, ask them whether they understand the message you're trying to convey with your ad.

Now, I don't mean to suggest that you should stick a sketch of your ad in some unsuspecting soul's face and ask, "Is the main idea of this ad understandable to you?" No. That approach will lead directly to a dead-end yes-or-no answer—it won't get you anywhere. Instead, you might present your ad to members of your target market and ask them to identify its main idea. If you get several responses you didn't anticipate, it's back to the drawing board.

And while you're probing your market, be sure to listen to what your respondents *mean* rather than just what they say. For instance, you're selling a hardware product for which connectivity is probably an issue. You approach members of your target market and, after showing them your ad, ask, "If you were to buy this product, would connectivity be an issue for you?" Your respondents might say, "No, connectivity is not a problem." But what they might well mean is "Connectivity is not a problem, because if the product doesn't have the connectivity I require, I won't even look at it." Listening for the message underlying what your target market tells you is essential.

Knowing Your Competition. To create an effective ad, you must also understand how your product is perceived in comparison with your competition's product. And you need to interpret the word *competition* in the broadest sense. A product always has competition. Even the first personal computers had competition, and I'm not referring to the VAX or mainframes from Big Blue but rather pen and paper. Ask yourself what the members of your target audience are doing now without your product. Ask yourself how they are doing it, and then find out which products they're using to do it. Conveying a knowledge of your competition in your ad never hurts.

This becomes even more important as product categories blend. For example, you've developed a product that combines a relational database, a spreadsheet program, and a word processor with drawing capabilities (wisely, you've left out the kitchen sink). How do you position such a product? Your competition may not be immediately apparent to you. However, a conversation with your potential buyers will help identify products *they* perceive to be

competing with yours. By discovering how your potential buyers view your product, you might also more thoroughly understand what its major benefits are.

Attending to Detail. For an ad to be effective, it has to be relevant and understandable to the target market. A simple example: You're a software manufacturer selling direct. Does your ad list your products by category or publisher? Well, that depends on what is easiest for your target audience to recognize. If you're going to list your products by publisher, you'd better be sure the names of all the publishers are well known.

Also bear in mind that the design of your ad should clearly represent your product. If, for example, you're known for a DOS software product that you are now introducing for the Mac, you might consider changing the look of your packaging and your advertising. Your bronze-and-black color scheme may be easily identifiable, and it may therefore seem logical to extend that look to your Mac product. But beware. Purchasers often tell me that they expect a Mac product to represent the machine it runs on. That implies color, a graphic look, and a message that's quite different from what you'd deliver to DOS buyers.

Adding It All Up. In general, people don't want to work to understand your ad. Your message must be immediately recognizable and relevant to your market, to their problems, to the benefits they seek. You can't guarantee success, but you can radically decrease the possibility of failure by defining your goals and your strategy and testing your hypotheses out on the audience you're selling to.

By doing so, you may well avoid joining the legions of advertisers dissatisfied with what they get (or don't get) for their money.

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